

Attention: Community Development and Recreation Committee

RE: Housing Stabilization Fund Deputation

As a Student Legal Aid Clinic, the Community & Legal Aid Services Programme (CLASP) interacts daily with clients who rely on income support through Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Income support through these programs provides recipients with extraordinarily limited funds to provide for their basic needs and accommodations. The Housing Stabilization Fund (HSF) is an important program that assists Torontonians living in low-income households to secure appropriate housing. However, access to this program is restrictive and does not fully satisfy the purpose for which it was intended - “to help meet the emergency housing needs of Toronto residents who receive assistance from Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program”. According to *Social Planning Toronto*, between January and June of 2013 more than 2,100 applicants were deemed ineligible for HSF support. In addition, the HSF budget has been cut by \$4.3 million, leaving more than 8,000 additional applicants in precarious living conditions without any funding support and a high risk of being homeless.

In order to provide housing security, the budget supporting the HSF should not be reduced and the mechanisms through which the fund is accessed should be transparent, consistent, and accountable.

Access through OW and ODSP Workers:

OW and ODSP workers are the main points of contact for residents seeking to access the HSF. It is incumbent upon the City of Toronto to ensure that these employees are equipped with a harmonized set of criteria that is used to determine the eligibility of HSF applicants. Although a set of criteria is published regarding eligibility, there seems to be no consistency in the disbursement of funds.

Training:

To ensure that all OW caseworkers apply the same criteria when making a decision to award or deny a HSF applicant, there should be a reemphasis on standardized training across all social assistance offices. In addition, an exhaustive and descriptive list of criteria should be provided to the applicant without being requested by promoting awareness of the fund to individuals in need of housing support. This will ensure that the applicant is informed about the process and criteria that will support a successful claim.

Additionally, all individuals that have been approved for OW or ODSP funding, should be immediately informed of the HSF and the application procedures. This will ensure all individuals have proper access to the funds and completion of applications can be made in a timely manner.

Reasons and Appeal Process:

In some instances, applicants are not being provided sufficient or detailed reasons as to why their HSF applications have been denied. In addition, the applicant is unable to seek redress through an accessible and transparent appeals process. Applicants who have been denied may request an internal review that is completed by the supervisor and office manager. Any negative decision is final and there is no appeal to a higher level. A negative decision by the office manager is made verbally to the applicant and no written reasons are provided.

The implementation of an appeals process will help to ensure that decision makers are held accountable and would provide consistency in decision making and transparency. By providing an appeal process that parallels the ODSP appeal process, a third party such as the Social Benefits Tribunal, could provide proper oversight to ensure consistency and accountability is followed when awarding HSF income support. The appeals process under the previous program, the Community Startup and Maintenance Benefit operated under the oversight of the Social Benefits Tribunal and would be the optimal process to ensure accountability and transparency.

Access to Funds/Turn around time:

The HSF is intended to assist residents on OW or ODSP who are in emergency housing situations. Unfortunately, many successful applicants do not get access to the funds as quickly as needed and are sometimes forced to allocate their basic needs funds until they receive the HSF funds. An expedited process must be established to ensure that applicants who are in emergency situations receive the fund as quickly as possible.

Conclusion:

To have the HSF accessible to individuals who are in emergency housing situations, all individuals on OW and ODSP must be made aware of the existence of the program. Proper procedures and criteria must be made publicly available.

Additionally, an in-year adjustment should be made to the budget to ensure that assistance is provided to the original 35,000 applicants the HSF was meant to support.

Finally, a proper appeals process that includes providing written reasons as to why an application has been rejected and a further appeal to the Social Benefits Tribunal will provide the accountability and oversight needed to ensure the fair management of the HSF.

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